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ABSTRACT

A survey of graduate teaching assistants and associate instructors at 102 graduate speech communication departments provided information on the amount, type, and assessment of orientation programs currently available to novice instructors. Of the 1,246 graduate students who were polled, 352 supplied data. Only 2.6% of these teaching assistants (TAs) did not have teaching responsibilities. Of the remaining 343 TAs, 20.4% were not required to take part in instructional training/orientation programs, while 60.6% were required to have such training before taking over a class. The study revealed that more than half of the orientation programs were of rather short duration (less than a full quarter or semester), and that the amount and type of such training correlated to the amount of responsibility apportioned to the TA. Discussions about problem situations, evaluation methods, and techniques of critiquing student presentations were included in the vast majority of the teacher training programs. On the other hand, discussions on lecture methods, lesson plans, learning models, and experiential methods were included in only one-third to two-fifths of all orientation courses. Although 41.1% considered their programs as adequate, slightly more than one-half the TAs did not feel sufficiently trained for their emerging roles as teachers. (RI)

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY ON THE EFFICACY OF ORIENTATION PROGRAMS FOR NOVICE INSTRUCTORS

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In recent years, the academic world has seen a growing interest in teacher and course evaluations on college and university campuses throughout the country. In view of the fact that graduate teaching assistants (G.T.A.'s) and/or associate instructors (A.I.'s) provide instruction for a large portion of the discipline's undergraduate student population, it is essential for these novice instructors to provide effective teaching. The present-day demand for quality instruction by these teaching assistants is best summarized in Bassett and Browning's article "Recommendations for the Evaluation and Improvement of Graduate Teaching Assistants' Instructional Effectiveness." [1] According to these authors, there are three major reasons why communication departments should want to guarantee effective instruction by their teaching assistants. First, G.T.A.'s usually staff the large multi-section service courses which are required by other departments. If the quality of teaching is not satisfactory to these departments, they will drop the courses as requirements and enrollment in speech communication courses will decrease dramatically. Second, the introductory courses taught by the teaching assistants is oftentimes the undergraduate student's first contact with the discipline. If these courses are to function as a source for recruiting new speech communication majors, it is essential that the G.T.A.'s present a positive image of the field. Third, given the fact that colleges and universities expect a decline in student enrollments throughout the 1980s, all departments will be competing for the same restricted number of students. If the graduate teaching assistants do not attract students to their courses, speech communication departments will be forced to limit their offerings and faculty positions. But if Bassett and Browing's three-fold argument seems too self-serving, there is still another point that needs to be considered: if undergraduate students are expected to learn the principles of effective communication, it is crucial that their respective instructors effectively communicate these procedures.

After all, speech is a learned behavior and students emulate those teachers who appear competent, authoritative, and dynamic. Given all of the preceding concerns, it is only natural that one of the most compelling problems facing those in the field of communication education today is the responsibility of providing adequate training for graduate teaching assistants. Despite the increasing awareness and interest in this problem,[2] little has been done to analyze the effectiveness of orientation programs for these newcomers to the field.[3] The purpose of this article, therefore, is to report the results of a survey given to graduate teaching assistants concerning the efficacy of the teacher training programs at their respective schools.

Methodology

In May, 1979 and September, 1979, questionnaires were mailed to graduate teaching assistants and associate instructors at 102 graduate departments in speech communication in an effort to obtain information regarding the amount, type, and assessment of orientation programs currently available to these novice instructors. The G.T.A.'s and A.I.'s selected for this study included only those graduate students enrolled in programs whose respective chairperson had answered a previous questionnaire pertaining to the same concerns.[4] Questionnaires were sent to 1246 graduate students in colleges and universities in thirty-nine states. Three hundred and fifty-two questionnaires, or 28.3%, were returned. The questionnaire gleaned the following information:

1. the relative responsibility each G.T.A. has over his/her class;
2. whether or not the department offers any type of formal teacher training for its graduate teaching assistants;
3. whether or not such training is required for all graduate teaching assistants;
4. whether or not such training is required prior to the graduate teaching assistants' first encounter with their respective classes;
5. the duration of the training;
6. the general content of the training;
7. the methods employed to evaluate the effectiveness of each G.T.A.; and
8. whether or not the teacher training program is judged to be effectual.

Results

Nine respondents, or 2.6% of the 352 teaching assistants who completed the questionnaire, do not have any teaching responsibilities. Since the vast majority, or 97.4%, are responsible for presenting the course content and/or evaluating undergraduate performance in the course, it can be inferred that almost all teaching assistants in speech communication departments across the country actually serve as instructors rather than as assistants to the instructors. Moreover, an analysis of the 343 G.T.A.'s who assume the role of an instructor indicates that 46.6% have sole responsibility for the course including developing their own course plans, syllabi, exams, and other materials; 39.4% have primary responsibility for the course while utilizing departmental course plans, syllabi, exams, and other materials; and 14% share the responsibility with a faculty member and teach under his/her supervision. Hence, over four-fifths of the teaching assistants fulfill two of the most important duties of a college instructor: presenting the course content and evaluating student performance.

To determine whether or not these teachings assistants are properly prepared to assume their new role, the respondents were asked several questions concerning the orientation programs at their respective schools. Table 1 presents the following data on these programs: whether or not such training is available; whether or not such training is required; whether or not the training is required before a G.T.A. is given his/her own class to teach; and whether or not this training is correlated to the amount of responsibility given to the G.T.A.'s.

TABLE 1

TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Training Offered	Yes	No
Number	216	127
Percent	63	37

(Continued)

(Continued from Pg. 3)

Training Required	Yes-Before G.T.A. is given own class	Yes-Anytime during graduate career	Not Required
Number	131	41	44
Percent	60.6	19.0	20.4

Training is correlated to the type of responsibility given to the teaching assistants:

Training is (or,is not) required for G.T.A.'s with:	Yes	No
Sole Responsibility	99(61.9%)	61(38.1%)
Primary Responsibility	91(67.4%)	44(32.6%)
Shared Responsibility	26(54.2%)	22(45.8%)

Judging by the responses, it is evident that almost two-thirds of the departments utilizing graduate teaching assistants' offer some type of instructional training for these G.T.A.'s. Out of the departments which offer this training, 79.6% require this experience for the teaching assistants. Only 60.6%, however, require this experience before a G.T.A. is given his/her own classes to teach. It is also clear from the last segment of this table, that approximately two-thirds of the G.T.A.'s who have either sole or primary responsibility for their classes are required to take part in some type of orientation program.

To assess the duration of these training programs, the respondents were asked to check one of the following choices: periodic G.T.A. meetings, a short course (less than a full quarter or semester), a quarter or semester long course, and formal training beyond one quarter or semester (for example, more than one course, or a combination of courses and meetings or workshops, etc.). Table 2 presents the data on the duration of these programs and compares this information to the amount of responsibility given to the G.T.A.'s.

TABLE 2

DURATION OF TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Duration of Training[5]	Periodic Meetings	A Short Course	A Quarter(or Semester) Long Course	A Combination-Course and Meetings
Number	85	30	59	49
Percent	38.1	13.5	26.5	22.0

Duration of training is correlated to the type of responsibility given to the teaching assistants:[6]

G.T.A.'s with:	Periodic Meetings	A Short Course	A Quarter(or Semester) Long Course	A Combination-Course and Meetings
Sole Responsibility	36(42.4%)	9(30%)	28(47.5%)	28(57.1%)
Primary Responsibility	40(47.1%)	15(50%)	23(39.0%)	14(28.6%)
Shared Responsibility	9(10.6%)	6(20%)	8(13.6%)	7(14.3%)

As is quite obvious from the figures shown in Table 2, slightly more than 50% of the teaching assistants receive less than one full course (one quarter or semester) in instructional development. Moreover, this table indicates that the duration of the training is rather evenly distributed across the amount of responsibility given to the G.T.A.'s.

To gain knowledge on the topics covered in these training sessions, the respondents were asked to identify specific content areas included in the agenda in their respective program. The number of responses and the percentage for those responses are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3

CONTENT AREAS INCLUDED IN TRAINING PROGRAMS

Content Area	Number	Percent[7]
Discussion of problems encountered while teaching	184	85.2
Evaluation methods (exam preparation, grading techniques, etc.)	154	71.3
Techniques of criticizing student presentations	145	67.1
Course outline preparation	112	51.9
General philosophy of speech communication education	107	49.5
Educational goal formation and/or behavioral objective construction	106	49.1
Course syllabi construction	104	48.1
Lecture methods	90	41.7
Unit and lesson plan development	84	38.9
Educational theory and learning models	76	35.2
Experiential learning methods	69	31.9

It is evident that discussions on problem situations, evaluation methods, and techniques of criticizing student presentations find their way into the vast majority of teacher training programs throughout the country. On the other hand, discussions on lecture methods, lesson plans, learning models, and experiential methods are only included in one-third to two-fifths of all orientation courses.

To ascertain how these teaching assistants are being evaluated, each respondent was asked to check as many of the following methods as apply to his/her own experience as a G.T.A. faculty visitation to class, oral feedback on visit, written feedback on visit, and student evaluations. The answers to this question show that 94.5% of the teaching assistants are evaluated by their students. Unfortunately, the results also reveal that only 35% of the G.T.A.'s are formally observed in their role as teaching assistants. And out of these 120 novice instructors who are observed by a faculty member, only 75.8% receive oral comments concerning the visit, and only 47.5% receive written comments concerning the visit. The authors of this article found these results to be quite distressing. Needless to say, the authors believe there is a need for all teaching assistants to be observed by their respective supervisors and to receive oral as well as written feedback on these observations.

Finally, each respondent was asked," In your opinion, are the graduate students in your department given adequate preparation to teach at the college level?" The data gathered from this question appear in Table 4.

TABLE 4
ARE G.T.A.'s GIVEN ADEQUATE PREPARATION TO TEACH AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Number[8]	36	97	28	102	60
Percent	11.1	30.0	8.7	31.6	18.6

The figures in Table 4 disclose the fact that 50.2% of the teaching assistants believe that the orientation programs in their respective departments are not adequate preparation for college teaching. In other words, slightly over one-half of the G.T.A.'s do not feel sufficiently trained for their new role in academia. Out of the remaining respondents, 41.1% view their programs as being adequate.

Conclusion

It is the viewpoint of the authors as well as other educators in our field(see note 2) that all graduate teaching assistants and associate instructors in speech communication should receive some type of formal teacher training. Regrettably, this is not so. The results of this study make it clear that slightly less than two-thirds of the communication departments utilizing G.T.A.'s and/or A.I.'s offer some type of orientation programs. While 63% is a significant proportion, it also indicates that slightly more than one-third of the communication departments do not offer any formal training for their teaching assistants. In addition, this study reveals that more than half of the orientation programs currently available to these G.T.A.'s are of rather short duration (less than a full quarter or semester). Given the fact that a majority of these programs is of short duration, it is not surprising to learn that discussions on lecture and experiential learning methods as well as on curriculum development are only included in one-third to two-fifths of all training courses. Hence, a large portion of the G.T.A.'s are expected to learn these techniques as they teach. It is the opinion of the authors that this "learn as you go" method encourages the floundering of many novice instructors and thus can not be regarded as a satisfying or rewarding experience for the graduate teaching assistants and/or their respective students. Moreover,

This judgment is intensified by the disclosure that over half of the G.T.A.'s believe they are not adequately prepared for college teaching.

As a discipline, we are interested in offering high quality instruction. The authors of this article firmly believe that teacher training for novice instructors is part of this responsibility. We therefore urge all speech communication departments employing teaching assistants to provide instructional training programs for these new instructors. In our opinion, these programs should last at least the duration of one full course (one quarter or semester) and should include discussions on the following topics: departmental and university regulations and facilities; basic course requirements; problems encountered while teaching; lecture and experiential learning methods; procedures for leading in-class discussions; evaluation methods (exam preparation, grading techniques); techniques of criticizing student presentations; course outline preparation and course syllabi construction; unit and lesson plan development; general philosophy of speech communication education; educational goal formation; and educational theory and learning models. Moreover, the authors believe there is a great need for teaching assistants to be observed by their respective supervisors and to receive oral as well as written feedback on these observations.

Notes

1. Ronald E. Bassett and Larry D. Browning, "Recommendations for the Evaluation and Improvement of Graduate Teaching Assistants' Instructional Effectiveness," Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, 25 (August, 1978), 42.

2. Concern over this problem has been expressed at various speech association conventions. For example, the 1979 Speech Communication Association Convention in San Antonio, Texas sponsored a panel entitled "Improving the Teaching Effectiveness of Graduate Teaching Assistants"; the 1979 Eastern Communication Association Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania sponsored a panel entitled "What Orientation Program is Most Practical for Instructors of the Basic Course?"; the 1979 Eastern Communication Association's Basic Course Director's Conference in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania sponsored a panel entitled "Orientation Programs for Graduate Teaching Assistants and Instructors of the Basic Course"; and the 1978 Eastern Communication Association's Basic Course Director's Conference in New Britain, Connecticut sponsored a panel entitled "Orientation Programs for Instructors of the Basic Course."

3. A comprehensive review of the journals in our field demonstrates the lack of information being disseminated. While the authors found many articles concerning the training of speech teachers for the elementary and secondary school systems, they found only a small number of articles pertaining to the training of graduate teaching assistants in the university system. Fortunately, this survey also reveals that during the past few years there has been a steady increase in the number of articles related to teacher training programs for G.T.A.'s and hence implies the increasing awareness of the need for this information. See, for example, Ronald R. Allen, "The Graduate Assistant Looks at Himself," Central States Speech Journal, 9 (Spring, 1958), 47-50; Joseph C. Rhea, "Internship in the Training of College Teachers of Speech," Speech Teacher, 9 (November, 1960), 304-307; Art Pollock and Ellen Mopps, "A College Teaching Internship in Speech Communication, "Communication Education, 25 (March, 1976), 165-166; Ronald E. Bassett and Larry D. Browning, "Recommendations for the Evaluation and Improvement of Graduate Teaching

Assistants' Instructional Effectiveness," Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, 25 (August, 1978), 42-44; Ann Q. Staton-Spicer and Jody L. Nyquist, "Improving the Teaching Effectiveness of Graduate Teaching Assistants," Communication Education, 28 (July, 1979), 199-205; Kathryn B. DeBoer, "Teacher Preparation for Graduate Assistants," Communication Education, 28 (September, 1979), 328-331; and Ileen N. Kaufman-Everett and Philip M. Backlund, "A Descriptive Study of Speech Education Programs for Novice Instructors," Association for Communication Administration Bulletin, 31 (January, 1980), 47-52.

4. The original questionnaire was sent to the chairpersons of 214 graduate departments offering a Ph.D. in speech communication and/or theatre. These schools were randomly selected from the Directory of Graduate Programs in the Communication Arts and Sciences - 1979-1980. See Kaufman-Everett and Backlund, 47.

5. The total figure equals 223 due to multiple responses.

6. The figures in this section of the table also reflect multiple responses.

7. The percentage is figured out according to the actual number of orientation programs available to these G.T.A.'s: there are 216 programs in total.

8. Total responses equal 323. Twenty G.T.A.'s did not answer this question.